W. Eugene Smith. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, © Heirs of W. Eugene Smith

In a Spanish village, neighbors and relatives peer through the doorway upon the deathbed scene of a villager.

CHAPTER 1

Attitudes Toward Death: A Climate of Change

Dead end. Dead on. Dead center. Dead heat. Deadwood. Deadbeat. Dead tired. Dead stop. Deadline. Dead reckoning. Deadlock. Dead ahead.

Look at some of the connotations of the word *dead* in the English language. Are they positive or negative? There is no place to go when you get to a dead end, and there are usually unpleasant consequences when you miss a deadline. In contrast, however, dead reckoning gives us direction to a place where we are going.

This bit of linguistic exploration points up a paradox involved in the study of death and dying. How is our social world, our culture, set up to deal with death and the dead? Do we, consciously or unconsciously, relate to death as something to avoid? Or does death capture our attention as a defining moment, worthy of reflection and deliberate thought?

Of all human experiences, none is more overwhelming in its implications than death. Yet, we tend to relegate death to the periphery of our lives, as if it can be kept "out of sight, out of mind."[1] A first step toward gaining new choices about death is to recognize that avoiding thinking about it estranges us from an integral aspect of human life. As one writer says, "The moment we begin to be we are old enough to die."[2]

The study of death can "lead us to take seriously our finitude, our mortality, as something that provides significance to our lives."[3] Formally, *thanatology* is defined as the study of the facts or events of death and the social and psychological mechanisms for dealing with

them. The word is a linguistic heir of *Thantatos* from Greek mythology, where it is generally understood as a reference to "the personification of death." A practical definition of thanatology includes ethical and moral questions, as well as cultural considerations. It is concerned not only with medicine and philosophy, but also with many other disciplines: history, psychology, sociology, and comparative religion, to name a few. In a commencement address at Stanford University, Apple founder Steve Jobs said, "Death is very likely the single best invention of life." He called it "life's change agent."[4]

Expressions of Attitudes Toward Death

Direct, firsthand experience with death is rare. Nevertheless, death has a significant place in our social and cultural worlds. This is revealed through the manner in which death is portrayed by the mass media and in the language people use when talking about death, as well as in music, literature, and the visual arts. Notice how these varied expressions reveal thoughts and feelings about death, both individually and culturally.

Mass Media

Modern communication technology makes us all survivors of death as news of disasters, accidents, violence, and war is flashed around the world. When situations involve a perceived threat, people turn to the mass media for information. On September 11, 2001, for example, more than two billion people worldwide watched the attacks in real time or watched news reports about the attacks.[5] The Internet not only increases the speed at which news is reported, it also allows us to follow along with updates from international news agencies and comments from blogs giving further details and opinion.[6] What do these secondhand sources tell us about death and dying?

In the News

When you read the newspaper or an online news source, what kinds of encounters with death vie for your attention? You are likely to find an assortment of accidents, murders, suicides, and disasters involving sudden, violent deaths. A jetliner crashes, and the news is announced with banner headlines. You see a story describing how a family perished when trapped inside their burning home, or a story describing how a family's vacation came to an untimely end due to a fatal collision on the interstate.

Then there are the deaths of the famous, which are likely to be announced on the front pages, followed soon by feature-length *obituaries.* Prefaced by headlines, obituaries send a message about the newsworthiness editors attribute to the deaths of famous people. News organizations maintain files of pending obituaries for individuals whose deaths are considered newsworthy, and these obituaries are kept updated so they are ready when the occasion demands.

In contrast, the death of the average Joe or Jill is usually made known by a *death notice*—a brief, standardized statement printed in small type and listed alphabetically in a column of vital statistics "as uniform as a row of tiny

Herbert Johnson, Library of Congress

grave plots."[7] In some newspapers, obituaries for "ordinary Joes" are given more attention with "egalitarian obits," which aim to "nail down quickly what it is we're losing when a particular person dies."[8] Still, ordinary deaths—the kind most of us will experience—are usually mentioned only in routine fashion. The spectacular obscures the ordinary.

Whether routine or extraordinary, our encounters with death in the news media influence the way we think about and respond to death. Reports may have less to do with the *event* than with how that event is *perceived*. This point is illustrated by Jack Lule in his description of how black activist Huey Newton's death was reported in newspapers across the country.[9] Newton had a public career spanning two decades, yet most reports focused on the violent nature of Newton's death while ignoring other aspects of his life.

People look to the media not only for information about events but also for clues about their meaning. This can present problems in determining what is appropriate to report in stories that involve death and survivors' grief. Media coverage of horrific deaths sometimes leads to "revictimization" or "second trauma" after the initial trauma of the event itself. Reporters may seek to capture the experience of a tragedy at the expense of victims or their

survivors. The journalistic stance "If it bleeds, it leads" often sets priorities. Do the media help us explore the meaning of death or merely seek to grab our attention with sensational news flashes? Robert Fulton and Greg Owen point out that the media may "submerge the human meaning of death while depersonalizing the event further by sandwiching actual reports of loss of life between commercials or other mundane items."[10] The distinction between *public* event and *private* loss sometimes blurs, and the grief experienced by survivors or the disruption of their lives is generally given little attention.

Deaths from cancer and heart disease don't seem to interest us as much as deaths from plane crashes, roller coaster mishaps, or mountain lion attacks. Bizarre or dramatic exits grab our attention. Although the odds of dying from a heart attack are about 1 in 5, we seem more fascinated by death from bee stings (1 in 62,950), lightning (1 in 81,701), or fireworks (1 in 479,992).[11]

Media experts say that the "reality violence" on TV news really began with coverage of the Vietnam War.[12] As a "living-room" war, replete with daily doses of violent images for more than a decade, it would exert a lasting influence on how news is presented. Viewers were given a succession of violent images: wartime casualties both friend and foe, the execution of a Viet Cong lieutenant by gunshot to the head on a Saigon street, pictures of napalmed children, and images of a burning monk. This is "action news," and it is a marketable format that flourishes with such events as school shootings and the public death of a man on a Los Angeles overpass who, retrieving a shotgun, "blasted half his head away as police and news choppers hovered above."[13] Allan Kellehear says, "There is no shortage of death reportage in the media . . . however, what passes for death is frequently merely violence."[14] He adds: "As long as death and loss appear in newspapers and TV programmes in the context of 'problems' and 'tragedies,' our understanding of these will be coloured by these terms and concepts."[15]

Media analyst George Gerbner observes that depictions of death in the mass media are often embedded in a structure of violence that conveys "a heightened sense of danger, insecurity, and mistrust."[16] Such depictions reflect what Gerbner and his colleagues call a "mean world syndrome," in which the symbolic use of death contributes to an "irrational dread of dying and thus to diminished vitality and self-direction in life."

According to Gerbner, the effect of violent images in the media is not to cause viewers to become more violent themselves; rather, viewers are likely to perceive the world as a frightening and scary place, a place of murder and mayhem, disease and plague, threats of war, a world populated by psychotic killers, child abductors, terrorists, and threatening animals. This perception of a mean world in which predators of every stripe—and every species—appear forever on the loose and in attack mode creates a sense of anxiety and fear that is out of proportion with reality.[17]

Entertaining Death

Television's influence on our lives is well established. Programs such as *Six Feet Under, Bones,* and *CSI* may challenge certain taboos surrounding death,

but this interest in death and dying mainly serves to make the corpse what some commentators call the new "porn star" of popular culture.[18] Seldom do images portrayed in the mass media enhance our understanding of death by dealing with such real-life topics as how people cope with a loved one's death or confront their own dying.

Besides its appearance in movies of the week and on crime and adventure series, death is a staple of newscasts (typically, several stories involving death are featured in each broadcast), nature programs (death in the animal kingdom), children's cartoons (caricatures of death), soap operas (which seem always to have some character dying), sports (with descriptions such as "the ball is dead" and "the other team is killing them"), and religious programs (with theological and anecdotal mention of death). Despite this, the lack of stories depicting realistic themes portraying death, dying, and bereavement has been characterized as "an impoverishment of death symbolism" in the media.[19]

Turning to programming directed toward children, recall cartoon depictions of death. Daffy Duck is pressed to a thin sheet by a steamroller, only to pop up again a moment later. Elmer Fudd aims his shotgun at Bugs Bunny, pulls the trigger, bang! Bugs, unmarked by the rifle blast, clutches his throat, spins around several times, and mutters, "It's all getting dark now, Elmer. . . . I'm going. . . ." Bugs falls to the ground, both feet still in the air. As his eyes close, his feet finally hit the dirt. But wait! Now Bugs pops up, good as new. Reversible death!

Consider the western, which mutes the reality of death by describing the bad guy as "kicking the bucket"—relegated, no doubt, to Boot Hill at the edge of town, where the deceased "pushes up daisies." The camera pans from the dying person's face to a close-up of hands twitching—then all movement ceases as the person's breathing fades away in perfect harmony with the musical score. Or, more likely, the death is violent: the cowboy gunfight at the OK Corral, high noon. The gent with the slower draw is hit, reels, falls, his body convulsing into cold silence.

People who have been present as a person dies describe a very different picture. Many recall the gurgling, gasping sounds as the last breath rattles through the throat; the changes in body color as flesh tones tinge blue; the feeling of a once warm and flexible body growing cold and flaccid. Surprised by the reality, they say, "Death is not at all what I thought it would be like; it doesn't look or sound or feel like anything I see on television or in movies!"

Unrealistic portrayals of violent death fail to show real harm to victims, their pain, or appropriate punishment for perpetrators.

Thrillers featuring extreme violence and what has been called death porn have become a profitable genre for moviemakers. The road to more "blood and gore" in popular films was paved in part by the success of classic "slasher" or "dead teenager" movies, like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), which included point-of-view shots from the killer's perspective. In traditional horror films, the audience viewed the action through the eyes of the victim and thus identified with his or her fate. In slasher films, however, viewers are asked

> One of the first things we teach to journalism students in the USA is to use "died" instead of "passed away" or "departed this life," which is how most people can tell the difference between an obituary written by the funeral director and one written by a newspaper staff member. Even in American English, it seems nearly disrespectful to go to such lengths to avoid saying the obvious; when my time comes, I hope to have pre-written my own obit, which will say something to the effect that "Old Man Wilcox is dead. He has ceased to be. He has expired and gone to meet his maker. He is a stiff. Bereft of life, he rests in peace. Services will be held on Wednesday; cocktails will be served."

to identify with the attacker. (A similar form of identification can be found in violent video games.) The depictions of violence in such movies suggest that residual tendencies from our evolutionary background may attract human beings to "exhibitions of brutality and terror."[20]

When told of his grandfather's death, one contemporary seven-year-old asked, "Who did it to him?" Death is generally portrayed on television or in movies as coming from outside, often violently, reinforcing the notion that dying is something that *happens to* us, rather than something we *do*. Death is an accidental rather than a natural process. As our firsthand *experiences* of death and violence have diminished, *representations* of death and violence in the media have increased in sensationalism.

Movies engage our psychological faculties in profound and unique ways.[21] In thinking about the films, DVDs, and television programs you've watched recently, what are your observations about the ratio of positive and negative images of dying and death?

Language

Listen to the language people use when talking about dying or death, and you are likely to discover that it is often indirect. The words *dead* and *dying* tend to be avoided; instead, loved ones "pass away," embalming is "preparation," the deceased is "laid to rest," burial becomes "interment," the corpse is "remains," the tombstone is a "monument," and the undertaker is transformed into a "funeral director." Such euphemisms—substitutions of indirect or vague words and phrases for ones considered harsh or blunt—tend to suggest a well-choreographed production surrounding the dead. Hannelore Wass, a pioneering death educator, notes that euphemisms substituting for plain-spoken "*D* words" turn up even in the language of death and dying experts as terminal care becomes "palliative care," and dying patients are described as "life threatened."[22] Death may be described as "a negative patient-care outcome" and an airline crash as an "involuntary conversion of a 727."[23]

When plain talk about death is subverted by substitutions, reality is devalued and depersonalized. For example, description of the horror of death in war is often cloaked by euphemisms—individuals killed in battle

TABLE 1-1 *Death Talk: Metaphors, Euphemisms, and Slang*

Croaked	No longer with us
Kicked the bucket	Taking the dirt nap
Gone	In the great beyond
Expired	On the other side
Succumbed	Asleep in Christ
Left us	Departed
Lost	Transcended
Wasted	Bought the farm
Checked out	With the angels
Laid to rest	Cashed in
Pushing up daisies	Crossed over Jordan
Called home	Perished
Was a goner	Ate it
Bit the dust	It was curtains
Annihilated	Out of his/her misery
Liquidated	Ended it all
Terminated	Resting in peace
Gave up the ghost	Dropped the body
Rubbed out	That was all she wrote
Snuffed	Joined the ancestors
Bit the grass	Subject just fataled
Took the last journey	Gone west

are described in terms of "body counts" and civilian deaths are termed "collateral damage." The language people use when talking about death often reflects a desire to avoid blunt reality. Euphemisms, metaphors, and slang make up a large part of death talk (see Table 1-1).

However, the use of euphemism and metaphor does not always imply an impulse to deny the reality of death or avoid talking about it. These linguistic devices are also used to communicate subtler or deeper meanings than those associated with plainer speech. For example, terms like *passing* or *passing on* may convey an understanding of death as a spiritual transition, especially among members of some religious and ethnic traditions.

Similarly, sympathy cards provide a way for people to express condolences to the bereaved without directly mentioning death.[24] Some cards refer to death metaphorically, as in sentiments like "What is death but a long sleep?" while others apparently deny it in verses like "He is not dead, he is just away." Images of sunsets and flowers create an impression of peace, quiet, and perhaps a return to nature. The fact of bereavement, losing a loved one by death, is generally mentioned within the context of memories or the healing process of time. It is interesting to check the greeting-card rack to see if you can find a card that plainly uses the word *dead* or *death.* By acknowledging loss in a gentle fashion, sympathy cards are intended to comfort the bereaved.

After someone dies, our conversations about that person usually move from present tense to past tense: "He *was* fond of music," "She *was* a leader in her field." Using this form of speech, which grammarians term the *indicative voice,* is a way of acknowledging the reality of death while distancing us from the dead. One way to continue to include the "voice" of the deceased in present circumstances lies in the use of the *subjunctive,* which has been described as the mode of "as if," of what "might be" or "could have been." It is a "zone of possibility," rather than certainty.[25] We hear examples of this when people say things like "He would have been proud of you" or "She would have enjoyed this gathering tonight."

Language usage also tells us something about the intensity and immediacy of a person's encounter with death, as in the form of "danger of death" narratives—stories about close calls with death. In such stories, a shift in tense typically occurs when the narrator reaches the crucial point in his or her story, the point when death seems imminent and unavoidable. Consider the following example: A man who had experienced a frightening incident while driving in a snowstorm began telling his story in the past tense as he described the circumstances. As he came to the point when his car went out of control on an icy curve and began to slide into the opposing lane of traffic, however, he abruptly switched to the present tense, as if he were *reliving* the experience of watching an oncoming car heading straight for him and believing in that moment that he was about to die.[26]

Word choices can also reflect changes in how a death event is experienced at different times. For example, after a disaster occurs, as the focus of rescue efforts changes, so does the language used to describe the work of emergency personnel and search-and-rescue teams. As hours stretch into days, *rescue* work becomes *recovery* work.

Scholars point out that language appears to influence many aspects of human thought. In fact, what we normally call "thinking" is a complex set of collaborations between linguistic and nonlinguistic representations and processes.[27] Look again at the words and phrases used in death talk (see Table 1-1). Notice how language offers clues about the manner of death and the speaker's attitude toward the death. Subtle distinctions may reflect different attitudes, sometimes involving cultural frameworks. Consider, for instance, the difference between *passed away* and *passed on.* Paying attention to the euphemisms, metaphors, slang, and other linguistic devices people use when talking about death is a way to appreciate the variety and range of attitudes toward dying and death.

Music

In *Music of the Soul,* Joy Berger writes, "Nearly every civilization, culture, and religion exemplifies the use of music at times of loss and grief."[28] Pipes and flutes were referred to by Euripedes in his play *Helen* as an aid to mourning. Leonard Bernstein's Symphony no. 3 (*Kaddish*) is based on the Jewish prayer for the dead. Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* depicts the death of an artist. Significant compositions written to commemorate the

events of September 11, 2001 include John Adam's *On the Transmigration of Souls* and Steve Reich's *WTC 9/11*. Music scholar Ted Gioia reminds us that the potency and transformational power of music is enhanced by its ability to create a unity of purpose. He notes that the "deep faith in the transformational power of sound is so widespread in traditional cultures that we are perhaps justified in calling it a universal belief."[29]

The *dirge* (a hymn of grief) is a musical form associated with funeral processions and burials. The jazz funeral of New Orleans is a well-known example of a popular interpretation of the dirge. Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Strauss, Brahms, Mahler, and Stravinsky all wrote dirges. Related to dirges are *elegies*—musical settings for poems commemorating a person's death—and *laments*. Elegies are emotional acknowledgments that "all things are impermanent, which is itself a profound spiritual understanding."[30]

Laments are an expression of stylized or ritualized leave-taking found in many cultural settings, one example being Scottish clan funerals, where bagpipes are played. Vocally, the typical lament is an expression of mourning called *keening,* an emotional expression of loss and longing that is reminiscent of crying. For the ancient Greeks, lamentation was intended to both "praise the deceased and provide emotional release for the bereaved."[31] An audience, hearing the lament, were "enabled to use the expressions of loss and sorrow as their own, thereby diminishing the opportunity for explosive and spontaneous eruptions of anguish."[32]

Laments may help the bereaved identify their altered social status and seek sympathetic understanding from the community.[33] Italian philosopher Ernesto De Martino traced how the practice of lamentation—in word, gesture, and music—moderates the tendency toward collapse or breakdown that threatens persons in moments of extreme crisis, such as the aftermath of the death of a close relative.[34] In this way, laments promote the cultural reintegration of the mourner while simultaneously reestablishing bonds of alliance between the living and the dead. In a well-known Greek lament, a mother says that she will take her pain to the goldsmith and have it made into an amulet so that she can wear it forever.[35]

The *requiem,* a musical composition played at a mass for the dead, is related to the elegy. This musical form has attracted composers like Mozart, Berlioz, and Verdi, among others. One section of the Requiem Mass, the *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath"), is a musical symbol for death in works by many composers. In Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830), this theme is heard, first following an ominous tolling of bells and then, as the music reaches its climax, in counterpoint to the frenzied dancing of witches at a *sabbat.* Berlioz's *Symphonie* tells the story of a young musician who, spurned by his beloved, attempts suicide with an overdose of opium. In a narcotic coma, he experiences fantastic dreams that include a nightmarish march to the gallows. The *Dies Irae* is also heard in Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre* (1874) and Franz Liszt's *Totentanz* (1849), two of the best-known musical renditions of the Dance of Death (discussed in its historical context in Chapter 3).

Tragedy and death are common in opera. This art form, which combines drama with music, has been characterized as obsessed with death, or at least a romanticized view of death prevalent in Western culture during the time frame of such classic compositions as *Aida, Carmen, La Bohème, Madame Butterfly, Tosca,* and *La Traviata.*[36]

As these examples attest, death themes are heard in both religious and secular compositions. Pink Floyd's "Time" is a musical reminder of the limits of a life span and how each day's passing brings us "closer to death." Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" was written for his four-year-old son who died from a fall from a high-rise in Manhattan. Tim McGraw's "Live Like You Were Dying" celebrates life renewed after the death of his father.

The lyrics of Elvis Presley's early hit "Heartbreak Hotel" reportedly were inspired by a suicide note that contained the phrase "I walk the lonely street." The branch of heavy metal music known as death metal is partly defined by its lyrics, which convey images of homicide, catastrophic destruction, and suicide, performed by bands with names like Morbid Angel, Napalm Death, Carcass, and Entombed. Indeed, death imagery in rock music may have helped break the taboo against public mention of death. Support for this thesis is found in surveys of Top 40 songs.[37] Some authorities have traced the beginnings of the civil rights movement to a musical event that occurred sixteen years before Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus: Billie Holiday's singing of "Strange Fruit," the lyrics of which describe horrific imagery of the lynching of African Americans.[38]

Music has been recruited to enlist patriotic support for war efforts, as in George M. Cohan's "Over There" during the First World War.[39] It has also been used to cast doubt on the legitimacy of war. During the Vietnam conflict, listeners heard Country Joe McDonald's "Fixin' to Die Rag," with its well-known refrain, "What are we fighting for?"

Mayhem and misery have long been staples of music. Folk ballads describe premonitions of death, deathbed scenes, last wishes of the dying, the sorrow and grief of mourners, and the afterlife. Consider such songs as "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" (war), "Long Black Veil" (mourning), "Casey Jones" (accidental death), and "John Henry" (occupational hazards).

Themes of suicide are also common, especially in tales of love and death. Some songs, such as "The Ballad of Jesse James," glorify outlaws and other bad guys. Graeme Thomson observes that "Stagger Lee" is a close relative of "Jesse James," except "Stag has no great quest for justice to pursue; he is just plain *bad.*"[40] This musical genre is also found in Mexican popular culture in the form of *narcocorridos,* narrative songs or *corridos* that describe the careers of smugglers and drug lords.[41]

In American blues music, themes of loss, separation, tribulation, and death are commonly heard. Disasters have inspired blues lyrics, as with the sinking of the *Titanic* and the 1927 Mississippi River flood. The desire to be remembered after death is voiced in Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean." In "I Feel Like Going Home," Muddy Waters tells us that death sometimes brings relief. Other examples of blues themes include

Bessie Smith's "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" (economic reversal), T-Bone Walker's "Call It Stormy Monday" (lost love), John Mayall's "The Death of J. B. Lenoir" (death of friend in a car accident), and Otis Spann's "The Blues Never Die" (consolation in loss). In all, the blues express "a deep stoic grief and despair, a dark mood of lamentation, but also a wry and ribald humor."[42]

Sometimes characterized as the flip side of the blues, gospel music expresses a wealth of images of loss and grief. Examples include "Oh, Mary Don't You Weep" (mourning), "Known Only to Him" (facing one's own death), "When the Saints Go Marching In" (the afterlife), "If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again" (a parent's death), and "Precious Memories" (adjustment to loss and sustaining bonds with the deceased).

Charles Reagan Wilson identifies six categories of death in country music: (1) the pervasiveness of death, (2) violent and tragic death, (3) songs of love and death, (4) death and the family, (5) celebrity death, and (6) religious influences on death.[43] "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," a song that can be classified as both gospel and country, describes a mother's death and a child's grief in precise imagery. The Appalachian dirge "O, Death" reflects the *memento mori* tradition, a reminder of the reality of death. Country songs, as Wilson says, "continue to embody the idea that death should not be segregated from the rest of life, but should be dealt with openly as a natural and profound human concern."[44]

In traditional Hawaiian culture, chants known as *mele kanikau* were used as laments for commemorating a person's death.[45] Some *kanikau* were carefully composed; others were chanted spontaneously during the funeral procession. Imagery of the natural world is called upon to portray the writer's experience of loss.[46] Memories of shared experiences amid natural surroundings are mentioned: "My companion in the chill of Manoa" or "My companion in the forest of Makiki." Such chants fondly recall the things that bind together the deceased and his or her survivors. The message was not "I am bereft without you" but, rather, "These are the things I cherish about you."

Think about how music provides solace in experiences of loss. As we cope with losses that beset us throughout life, certain songs and musical works bring to mind poignant memories that refresh our grief.[47] Whether Mozart's *Requiem* or a Top 40 tune, music can cue the recall of happy moments shared with loved ones whose death has left us bereft. At other times, a lyric or melody sets us reflecting on our own mortality.

Themes of loss and death are heard in all musical styles (see Table 1-2).[48] As you listen to various styles of music, notice the references to dying and death and ask yourself, What messages are being conveyed? What attitudes are being expressed? Whatever your musical taste, you will find a wealth of information about individual and cultural attitudes toward death.

Literature

From the epic poetry of Homer's *Iliad* and the classic drama of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Shakespeare's *King Lear,* through modern classics like

TABLE 1-2 *Death Themes in Popular Music*

Performer	Song	Theme
Beatles	"Eleanor Rigby"	Aging and loss
Boyz II Men	"Say Goodbye to Yesterday"	Grief
Jackson Browne	"For a Dancer"	Eulogy
Mariah Carey	"One Sweet Day"	Missing a loved one
Johnny Cash	"The Man Comes Around"	Judgment Day
Eric Clapton	"Tears in Heaven"	Death of young son
Joe Diffie	"Almost Home"	Father's death
Dion	"Abraham, Martin, and John"	Assassination
Doors	"The End"	Homicide
Bob Dylan	"Knockin' on Heaven's Door"	Last words
Grateful Dead	"Black Peter"	Social support
Jimi Hendrix	"Mother Earth"	Inevitability of death
Elton John	"Candle in the Wind"	Deaths of Marilyn Monroe and Princess Diana
Patty Loveless	"How Can I Help You Say Goodbye"	Mother's death
Dave Matthews	"Gravedigger"	Anticipation of dying
Sinead O'Connor	"I Am Stretched on Your Grave"	Mourning
Pink Floyd	"Dogs of War"	Combat death
The Police	"Murder by Numbers"	Political deaths
Elvis Presley	"In the Ghetto"	Violent death
Snoop Dogg	"Murder Was the Case"	Urban homicide
Bruce Springstein	"Streets of Philadelphia"	AIDS
James Taylor	"Fire and Rain"	Friend's death
Stevie Wonder	"My Love Is With You"	Death of a child
Warren Zevon	"My Ride's Here"	Arrival of hearse and death

Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych,* James Agee's *A Death in the Family,* William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* and Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying,* death is treated as significant in human experience.[49] Ted Bowman observes that the language of bereavement and grief is enhanced by literary resources that help people give voice to their own stories of loss.[50]

Uncertainty about death is often found in poetry of mourning for the dead, which, Jahan Ramazani says, "assumes in the modern period an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and skepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before."[51] Earlier in this chapter, we discussed elegies in the context of musical expressions of attitudes toward death. Elegies are also expressed in literature. Note that the elegy is not to be confused with a eulogy (oratory or praise in honor of the deceased) or epitaph (a brief statement commemorating the deceased, often inscribed as a memorial on a tomb).

The term *elegy* refers to a poem or song memorializing the dead.[52] It is usually pensive, reflective, or plaintive, an expression of suffering or woe. Elegies typically describe feelings of sorrow, sadness, mournfulness, melancholy,

nostalgia, lamentation, or some blending of these qualities. Elegies have been characterized as "a way to say goodbye while celebrating who or what is gone."[53]

Early examples of the genre of elegy in English literature include John Milton's "Lycidas" (1637) and Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1750). Examples from American literature include "O Captain, My Captain" (1865), Walt Whitman's elegy on the death of President Abraham Lincoln, and "For the Union Dead" (1965), Robert Lowell's elegy based on the story of Colonel Robert Shaw, who led the first all-black brigade during the American Civil War.

Elegies have been written to express a personal sense of grief as well as out of a generalized feeling of loss and metaphysical sadness. Examples include the series of ten poems in *Duino Elegies* by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke and poems by Czeslaw Milosz, which lament the cruelties of totalitarian government. Other examples are Wilfred Owen's poems of moral objection to the pain wrought by industrialized warfare; Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish* after the death of his mother; Seamus Heaney's memorials to the suffering caused by political violence in Ireland; and the "parental elegies" in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich. Poems give us insight into the universality of loss in ways that can be consoling and therapeutic.[54] Edward Hirsch tells us, "Implicit in poetry is the notion that we are deepened by heartbreaks, that we are not so much diminished as enlarged by grief, by our refusal to vanish—to let others vanish—without leaving a verbal record."[55]

In literature, the meaning of death is often explored as it relates to society as well as the individual. Novels about war depict how individuals and societies search for meaning in shattering experiences of trauma and loss. In *All Quiet on the Western Front,* a novel set in the time of World War I, Erich Maria Remarque described the pointlessness of modern warfare by telling the story of a youthful combatant who quickly moves from innocence to disillusionment. The technological horror of World War II, particularly devastation

John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* reminds us that we cannot escape our mortality nor the pervasive angst that it arouses. In that story, a servant returns, profoundly shaken, from a trip to the market. His master asks what has caused the servant's terror. The servant replies that when someone in the crowd jostled him, he turned and noticed the Angel of Death beckoning him. The horror-stricken servant then asks his master for a horse so that he might ride to Samarra, some distance away, where the Angel of Death won't be able to find him. The master agrees, and the servant leaves for Samarra. Later that day, the master goes to the market. He, too, encounters the Angel of Death and asks why the Angel had made that threatening gesture to his servant. Death allegedly replies, "That was not a threatening gesture, simply one of surprise. I didn't expect to see him here today since I had an appointment to meet him tonight in Samarra."

Jean Lipman-Blumen,
"Our Existential Vulnerability to Toxic Leaders"

caused by the atomic bomb, is the focus of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. The surreal aspects of the Vietnam War received attention in books like Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato,* and similar accounts are being published about the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Holocaust literature, devastating experiences of horror and mass death are dealt with in victims' diaries, as well as in novels and psychological studies.[56] Examples include Chaim Kaplan's *Warsaw Diary,* Charlotte Delbo's *None of Us Will Return,* Elie Wiesel's *Night,* and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl.*

Modern literature often explores the meaning of death in situations that are seemingly incomprehensible. The hero tries to come to terms with sudden and violent death in situations that allow no time or place for survivors to express their grief or mourn their dead.[57] Themes may focus on a "landscape of violence."[58] In "vigilante" stories, for example, such as detective novels and some westerns, the hero sets out to avenge evil but is often corrupted by a self-justifying morality that only perpetuates violence.[59] Finding meaning in death is problematic, as violence reduces persons to the status of *things.*

Cadets at the United States Military Academy (West Point) learn about the historical role of poetry in shaping culture, attitudes, and values, with the aim of "dispelling the illusion that prepackaged answers are always there for the taking in a world flush with ambiguities."[60]

Visual Arts

In the visual arts, death themes are revealed through symbols, signs, and images.[61] Edvard Munch's *The Dance of Life,* which appears on the cover of this text, represents the artist's summing up of human fate: "Love and death, beginnings and endings, are fused in a roundel that joins private lives and lusts to the larger, inexorable cycle of ongoing generations."[62]

Art is often a vehicle for expressing the impact of personal loss. When Pan Am Flight 103 was brought down by a terrorist bomb, Suse Lowenstein's son was among those killed. As a sculptor, she found a way to express her own grief and that of other women bereft by the crash by making a series of female nude figures that compose an exhibit titled *Dark Elegy.* In earth tones, the larger-than-life figures are shown in the throes of grief (see Figure 1-1). Some figures look mute. Others are obviously screaming. Some look as though they were eviscerated. Lowenstein expressed the hope that *Dark Elegy* will be "a reminder that life is fragile and that we can lose that which is most precious to us so easily and have to live with that loss for the remainder of our lives."[63]

Art gives us a window into the customs and beliefs of other ages and places. For example, Charles Willson Peale's *Rachel Weeping* (1772 and 1776) depicts a deathbed scene from the American colonial period in which the artist's wife is shown mourning their dead child. The child's jaw is wrapped with a fabric strap to keep it closed. Her arms are bound with cord to keep them at her sides. Medicines, all of which have proved ineffective, sit on a

© Suse Lowenstein

Figure 1-1 *Dark Elegy*
About the women portrayed in her work *Dark Elegy,* the artist says, “One by one, they come into my studio, step onto a posing platform, close their eyes, and go back to December 21, 1988, to that horrible moment when they learned that their loved one had died. . . . This is the moment I freeze in time. This is the pose that I shape into sculpture.”

bedside table. As the mother gazes heavenward, she holds a handkerchief to wipe away the tears streaming down her face, her grief in marked contrast to the dead child's peaceful countenance.

Francisco José de Goya's *Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta* exemplifies an artistic genre that depicts deathbed scenes and persons *in extremis*. Completed for the doctor who aided in Goya's recovery from a life-threatening illness, this painting shows the doctor holding medicine to Goya's lips while the figure of Death is depicted next to people who are thought to be Goya's priest and his housekeeper. Suicide is another theme dealt with by artists of virtually all eras and cultures. A well-known example is Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Suicide of Lucretia,* which portrays Lucretia with a tear in her eye, moments after she has stabbed herself with a dagger.

One of the most arresting expressions of dying and death ever to emerge in the graphic arts occurred in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. Growing out of widespread fears about the spread of plague, the images associated with the *Danse Macabre* (Dance of Death) display a concern with the stark features of mortality and fears of sudden, unexpected death. An example is found in the Bargello National Museum in Florence, where a series of three wax sculptures by Italian artist Gaetano Giulio Zumbo depicts the process of body dissolution from the fresh cadaver to one the worms have completely devoured. The morbid aspects of mortality have also evoked attention by more recent artists, as in Fritz Eichenberg's woodcuts depicting the fears of our era: annihilation caused by war, environmental catastrophe, and diseases such as AIDS.[64]

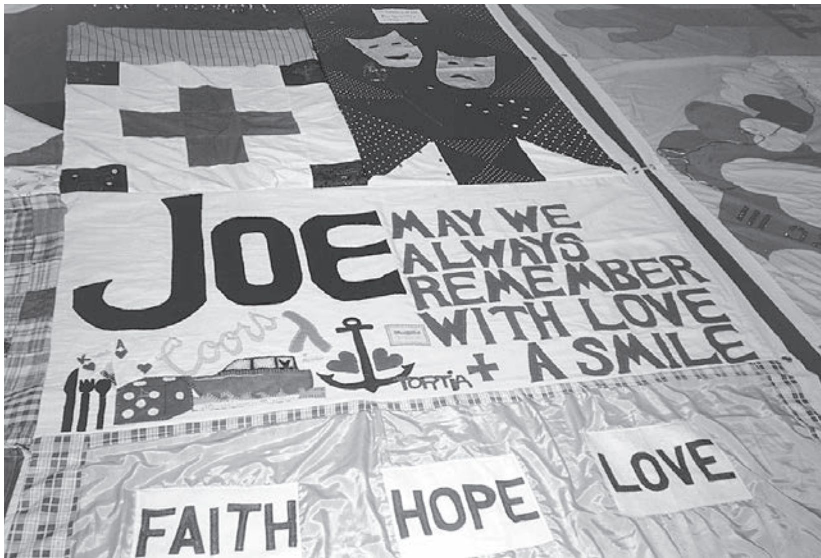
In some art, we find a whimsical attitude toward death, as in the engravings of Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada, which contain skeletal figures from all walks of life engaged in daily routines, or in American sculptor Richard Shaw's *Walking Skeleton,* with the skeleton composed of twigs, bottles, playing cards, and similar found objects.

During the nineteenth century, people throughout the United States incorporated both classical and Christian symbols of death to memorialize public figures as well as family members.[65] Embroidered memorials to the dead were hung in the parlor, the most important room of the house, and elaborate quilts were sewn into designs that celebrated the life of the deceased. Such mourning art provided not only a way to perpetuate memories of a loved one but also a focus for physically coping with grief, an opportunity to actively grieve by doing something.

Similar motives led to the making of a massive quilt to commemorate persons who had died from AIDS: The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.[66] In folk art, quilts represent family and community. As the largest ongoing community arts project in America, the AIDS Quilt affirms the value of creative expression as a means of coping with loss.

> The quilt symbolized individuals sharing their grief by sharing their continuing bonds with friends and lovers, and in doing so the survivors became a community of mourners.[67]

Smithsonian Institution



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The making of a memorial quilt was among the elaborate personal and social mechanisms for dealing with grief widely practiced during the nineteenth century, as in this example memorializing a granddaughter who died in infancy. This traditional mourning custom was revived recently to commemorate and remember persons who died from AIDS; in the example shown here, words and symbols express beloved qualities of Joe's life. For survivors, the creation of such memorials provides not only a focus for physically working through grief but also a means of perpetualizing the memory of the loved one.

Maxine Junge points out,

> Creativity in the face of death offers a spectrum of life-enhancing possibilities. These possibilities can ward off a meaningless conclusion to a life, give meaning and hope to a life lived and to a future in which the dead, through memory, still exist.[68]

The urge to memorialize the dead and offer comfort to the bereaved through artistic means is also demonstrated by a variety of homemade condolences sent to relatives of military men and women killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.[69] Operation Gold Star Flag, formed by a group of military wives, revived a tradition of flag-making that began during World War I, when families with relatives in the military displayed in their windows small flags—white fields with red borders and in the middle a blue star, which was changed to gold if the serviceman was killed. Other groups, such as Marine Comfort Quilts and Operation Homemade Quilts, fashion quilts with center squares personalized in memory of each casualty.

A woman who had been given one of the Marine Comfort Quilts described how, when she finds herself missing her brother, she wraps herself in the quilt and cries until the wee hours of the morning: "It's called a 'comfort quilt,'" she said, "and that's exactly what it is; it has so much love from so many different people who never even met my brother." Another woman, a mother whose son was killed by friendly fire (that is, by his own comrades), said: "Your friends and family are there, but when you receive good deeds from people you don't even know, it makes you feel like you're not alone."[70]

Like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., designed by architect Maya Lin, is an example of contemporary mourning art that works to counter the anonymity of lives lost. It has been described as the "iconographic reversal of the Tomb of the Unknowns," with its "vast polished surface" serving as "the tombstone of the known."[71] On the wall, names of the dead are listed chronologically by the date of their death, rather than alphabetically, presenting a chronicle that vividly depicts the scale of losses. Mementos left by visitors are collected by the National Park Service, and items have been displayed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Similarly, at Arlington National Cemetery, the graves of veterans killed in Iraq and Afghanistan are decorated with handwritten notes and items that poignantly celebrate personal connection. Before those wars, the expression of grief at Arlington was confined to wreaths and flowers. Now, personnel from the U.S. Army Center for Military History come each week to add to a collection that may one day become an exhibit in a museum devoted to telling the story of war and its cost. About the commemorative function of war museums, Andrew Whitmarsh says:

> Memory and commemoration are constructed according to the social, cultural, and political nature, as well as the needs and experiences, of the society and individuals producing them. War museums have often been accused of sanitizing

> or glamorizing war through their depiction of "heroes" and their portrayal of death, The commemorative aspect of war museums directly affects their style of interpretation.[72]

In Japan, a shrine honoring the "spirits" of war dead has stirred diplomatic and domestic controversy because of differing interpretations of its significance and purpose.[73]

As Carla Sofka points out, when handled with care and sensitivity, such museums can be healing spaces, honoring the memories and legacies of both victims and survivors.[74]

The importance of the arts in a comprehensive understanding of how people cope with loss is expressed in this statement by the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement:

> The arts and humanities with their images, symbols, and sounds express themes of life, death, and transcendence. They are the language of the soul and can enable people to express and appreciate the universality as well as the particularity of each person's experience.[75]

In the visual arts, these themes and this language are evident in a broad range of works, from those formed out of the particulars of an individual's unique loss—as in the sculptures of Suse Lowenstein, which depict the grief of a parent following the death of a child—to those that function on a larger scale as *sites of memory* for losses that are both personal and communal—such as those commemorated by the AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. Whatever the scale, as Sandra Bertman points out, one of the main functions of art is to engage our awareness and "bring us closer to what language cannot reach."[76]

Humor

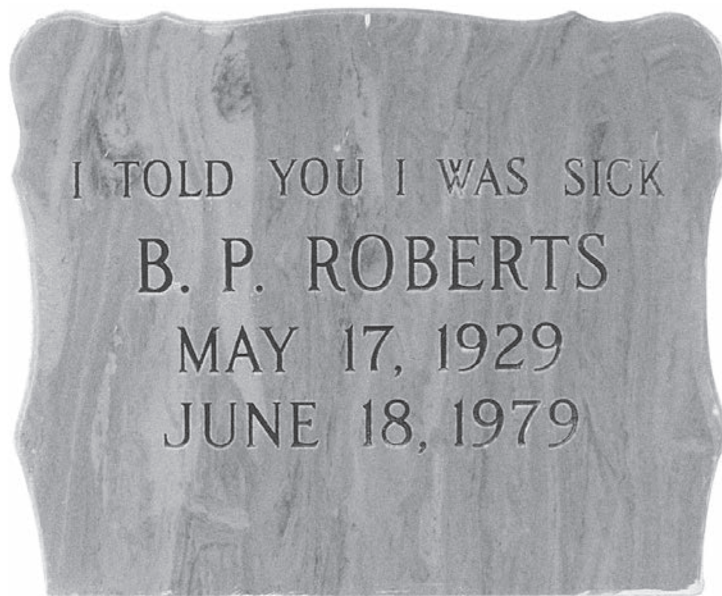
Humor defuses our anxiety about death. It puts fearful possibilities into manageable perspective. James Thorson says, "We make fun of that which threatens us."[77] Death-related humor comes in many different forms, from funny epitaphs to so-called black or gallows humor. Incongruity is one of the components of humor.[78] One joke, for example, describes a project manager who leaves a suicide note in the form of a PowerPoint presentation; the joke tells how his colleagues ignore the tragic content of the note while critiquing its presentation. Similarly, on a highway, motorists are taken aback by a gleaming white hearse with the cryptic license plates "Not Yett." Serious and somber matters can be easier to deal with when there is comedic relief.

There are "intimate connections between death and laughter."[79] Mary Hall observes that "what is humorous to each of us depends on our particular cultural set, our own experience, and our personal inclination."[80] Humor often functions as a kind of comment on incongruity or inconsistency relative to social norms or perspectives, as when a young girl wrote a letter to God asking, "Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones You have now?"[81] As Thorson points out, "Taking potshots at the spectre that will destroy us may not in fact do away with the

Ultimate Problem, but satire at least makes us feel better in some small way about our common fate. This is the essence of coping."[82]

A joke that is shared gleefully by one group of people may be shocking to others; there are constraints on the kinds of humor that a particular person or group finds acceptable. Nevertheless, humor helps us cope with painful situations. Individuals held as prisoners of war during the Vietnam War considered humor so important to coping that they would "risk torture to tell a joke through the walls to another prisoner who needed to be cheered up."[83] Humor is an important aid in confronting our fears and gaining a sense of mastery over the unknown.

Humor functions in several ways relative to death: First, it raises our consciousness about a taboo subject and gives us a way to talk about it. Second, it presents an opportunity to rise above sadness, providing a release from pain and promoting a sense of control over a traumatic situation, even if we cannot change it. Third, humor is a great leveler; it treats everyone alike and sends the message that there are no exemptions from the human predicament. Thus, it binds us together and encourages a sense of intimacy, which helps us face what is unknown or distressing. Humor can be a "social glue" that helps us empathize with others. After a death has occurred, humor can comfort survivors as they recall the funny as well as the painful events of a loved one's life. A sense of humor can moderate the intensity of negative life events.



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In place of the conventional sentiment usually engraved on tombstones, a touch of whimsy adorns this memorial to B. P. Roberts at a cemetery in Key West, Florida.

In situations involving interactions between patients and health care providers, humor is "one of the great tools of reassurance on the hospital ward."[84] For people who are seriously ill, humor offers a way to cope with the effects of a shattering diagnosis. It provides another perspective on a painful situation, as in the jest "Halitosis is better than no breath at all." When things are bad, humor can serve a protective psychological function and help people maintain their equilibrium.

Emergency services personnel and other individuals who encounter death on their jobs use humor to distance themselves from horrific death, as well as to rebond as a team rather than feeling isolated in their individual grief after traumatic incidents. A group of doctors at a medical center avoided using the word *death* when a patient died because of concern that it might alarm other patients. One day, as a medical team was examining a patient, an intern came to the door with information about the death of a patient. Knowing that the word *death* was taboo and finding no ready substitute, she announced, "Guess who's not going to shop at Walmart any more?" This phrase quickly became the standard way for staff members to convey the news of a patient's death among themselves when in a public setting. For caregivers, humor serves to communicate important messages, promote social relations, diminish discomfort, and manage delicate situations; it has been called the "oil of society."[85]

Living with Awareness of Death

It is said that "one of the most important and unique aspects of human experience is the awareness of our own mortality."[86] Ultimately, one cannot ignore or deny death. "Societies have traditionally taken tremendous care with the shared transformation of life into death because of their responsibility to preserve everyday life's continuity and stability in the face of death's many disruptions."[87] In our time, globalization exposes us to information about deaths far distant from the comfort of our own homes. We are confronted with death seemingly at every turn.

Threats of environmental destruction, nuclear catastrophe, violence, war, and terrorism have been joined by the specter of emerging pandemics. Today's global population has been described as *hibakusha,* a Japanese word meaning "explosion affected." Initially used to describe survivors of the

Clearly, nobody was exempt from the life of life, which dictated that old age, disease, and death were our common lot. Krishnamurti himself had often talked about it, jokingly quoting an Italian saying, *"Tutti gli uomini debbeno morire, forse anch'io."* When I asked him what it meant, he translated it, "All men must die, perhaps I, too."

Michael Krohnen, *The Kitchen Chronicles: 1001 Lunches with J. Krishnamurti*

atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the term now connotes pervasive anxiety about the threat of annihilation in our "cosmopolitan era."

Contemplating Mortality

Why is there death? Looking at the big picture, we see that death promotes variety through the evolution of species. The normal human life span is long enough for us to reproduce ourselves and ensure that the lineage of our species continues. Yet it is brief enough to allow for new genetic combinations that provide a means of adaptation to changing conditions in the environment. From the perspective of species survival, death makes sense. But this explanation offers little comfort when death touches our own lives. Norman Wirzba observes:

> Life as we know it *depends* on death, *needs* death, which means that death is not simply the cessation of life but its precondition. . . . Eating involves us in a daily life and death drama in which, beyond all comprehension, some life is sacrificed so that other life can thrive.[88]

In an article titled "Human Existence as a Waltz of Eros and Thanatos," the authors suggest that

> the proper antidote for death is love, but until the ubiquitous and powerful role of death is accepted, until we learn to "dance with death," love will continue to be treated as something appropriate only for romance and Sunday School.[89]

To remedy this misapprehension and expand our understanding of the relationship between love and death, we need to step out of our fast-paced lives and take time to learn how to "waltz with death" by contemplating the basic questions of human existence.

Dimensions of Thanatology

As pioneering Italian thanatologist Francesco Campione points out, death is not only a topic for reflection, study, and research; it is also an "existential problem," which touches every aspect of human existence and every field of knowledge.[90] Existential questions—such as, Who am I? What am I doing here? Where do I fit in the world?—focus on the meaning of life. Such questions are "concerned with the nature of authenticity and the responsibility of choice," and they are "discovered via a person's perception of reality and meaning."[91]

Robert Kastenbaum says that, although the term *thanatology* is usually defined as "the study of death," it is perhaps better defined as "the study of life with death left in."[92] Thus, as a field of study, thanatology encompasses a variety of disciplines and areas of concern (see Table 1-3). Other dimensions and examples can be added to this listing. For instance, *religious* thanatology has concerns similar to those of philosophical thanatology, but specifically as they occur in the context of devotion to a set of beliefs about the nature of ultimate reality (usually involving a deity); issues such as what happens to a person's soul or spirit after death and the nature of the afterlife are important within this domain of thanatology.

TABLE 1-3 *Dimensions of Thanatology*

Focus	Major Areas of Concern	Example Issues
Philosophical and ethical	The meaning of death in human life; questions of values and ethics	"Good" vs. "bad" death; concept of death; suicide and euthanasia
Psychological	Mental and emotional effects of death on individuals	Grief; coping with terminal illness; death anxiety
Sociological	How groups organize themselves to deal with social needs and problems related to dying and death	Response to disaster; disposal of the dead; socialization of children
Anthropological	Role of culture and environment across time and space regarding how individuals and societies relate to death and dying	Funeral rites; memorialization; ancestor worship
Clinical	Management of dying and death in medical settings; diagnosis and prognosis; relationships among patients, doctors, nurses, other caregivers	Treatment options; hospice and palliative care; pain and symptom control
Political	Governmental actions and policies related to dying and death	Capital punishment; organ transfer rules; conduct of war
Educational	Death education; public awareness of death-related issues and concerns	Curricula for instruction in schools; community programs

Acquiring a core knowledge of thanatology involves becoming familiar with all of these dimensions and their aspects. Together, they constitute what might be called "Thanatology" with a capital *T*. Professionals who work with the dying or the bereaved need to establish a firm foundation in thanatology alongside their expertise in health care or counseling.

Reviewing the scope and mission of death studies, Kastenbaum notes that mainstream thanatology has devoted its efforts to improving the care of people faced with life-threatening illness or bereavement, and it may be time to broaden the focus to include "large-scale death" and "death that occurs through complex and multi-domain processes."[93] This perspective would include not only the "horrendous deaths" that human beings inflict on each other in war and other forms of violence but also human-caused activities that threaten or result in the extinction of other species.

Death Anxiety and Fear of Death

Our relationship with death has, as Herman Feifel observed, "a shaping power on thinking and behavior at all points in the life span."[94] The way in which we anticipate death, Feifel says, governs our "now" in an influential

manner. This applies not only to people who are terminally ill, combatants in war, or people who fit other categories we tend to associate with an increased risk of death, such as those who are very old or suicidal. On the contrary, it is true for everyone and "for all seasons." Death challenges the idea that human life has meaning and purpose.[95]

The manner in which individuals respond to this challenge is "intertwined with the death ethos of the cultures in which they are embedded."[96] The distinctive stance toward death in a particular culture affects the behavior of its members as they go about their daily lives, influencing, for example, their willingness to engage in risky behaviors or their likelihood of taking out an insurance policy, as well as their attitudes toward such issues as organ donation, the death penalty, euthanasia, or the possibility of an afterlife. In a variety of ways, our culture helps us "deny, manipulate, distort, or camouflage death so that it is a less difficult threat with which to cope."[97] Consider, for example, the effect of a public health discourse that suggests death and misfortune can be avoided if people behave properly—eat the right things, exercise, stop smoking, and so on.[98] The paradox of our attitude toward death is highlighted by the writer Thomas McGuane in his remark that "everyone knows that they are going to die; yet nobody believes it."[99]

Avery Weisman pointed out that *realization* is critical in our efforts to understand death: "Most people concede that death is inevitable, a fact of nature. But they are not prepared to realize. We postpone, put aside, disavow, and deny its relevance to us."[100] Individuals and societies must, in fact, both accept and deny death. We must accept death if we wish to maintain a grasp on reality. Yet we must deny it if we are to go about our daily lives with a sense of commitment to a future that is inevitably limited by our mortality. According to Talcott Parsons, the characteristic attitude toward death in modern societies is less a matter of outright denial than it is "bringing to bear every possible resource to prolong active and healthful life" and accepting death only when "it is felt to be inevitable."[101]

The largest area of empirical research in thanatology is concerned with the measurement of attitudes toward death, and, more particularly, *death anxiety*.[102] In posing the question, What do we fear when we fear death? Robert Neimeyer and his colleagues suggest that the term *death anxiety* may be understood as "a shorthand designation for a cluster of death attitudes characterized by fear, threat, unease, discomfort, and similar negative emotional reactions, as well as anxiety in the psychodynamic sense as a kind of diffuse fear that has no clear object."[103]

Generally speaking, the findings from this research indicate that death anxiety tends to be higher among females than among males, higher among blacks than among whites, and higher among youth and middle-aged adults than among older people. People who describe themselves as religious tend to report less death anxiety than those who do not characterize themselves this way. Individuals who report a greater degree of self-actualization and sense of internal control also report less death anxiety than their counterparts. This summary gives a very broad-brush understanding of the overall

picture of death anxiety research. It is important to understand, however, that the responses elicited by such research are "by no means a full representation of one's awareness of the advancing resoluteness of death or consciousness of being-in-the-world."[104]

Despite the accumulated data from numerous studies, there are significant questions, which Neimeyer summarizes as follows:[105] First, what definition of death is implied by the various testing instruments? Second, what are the strengths and limitations of the various instruments that have been used in death anxiety research? Third, based on answers to the first two questions, what are the implications for future research? And, finally, reviewing the data gathered up to now, what do we really know?

One conclusion reached by Neimeyer and his colleagues is that "persons who accept both the dying process and the prospect of being dead one day as a natural part of their lives express less intense fear of dying and death." In short, they are "probably more able than others to see meaning in death by putting it into an overarching context."[106]

Research into death anxiety has been characterized by Kastenbaum as "thanatology's own assembly line."[107] Part of the appeal of death anxiety research, he says, lies in the fact that it "allows the researcher (and the readers, if they so choose) to enjoy the illusion that death has really been studied." How data from such research can be applied to practical issues is uncertain. If, for example, it were possible to reliably state that doctors with high death anxiety relate poorly to dying patients, then that finding might be applied constructively in health care settings. However, we are mostly unable to adequately gauge the effect of death anxiety on real-world issues.

What shall we make of studies showing that women have higher death anxiety scores than men? Does this gender difference mean that women are *too anxious* about death or that men are *not anxious enough?* Reviewing the research in this area, Herman Feifel said:

> Fear of death is not a unitary or monolithic variable. . . . In the face of personal death, the human mind ostensibly operates simultaneously on various levels of reality, or finite provinces of meaning, each of which can be somewhat autonomous. We, therefore, need to be circumspect in accepting at face value the degree of fear of death affirmed at the conscious level.[108]

Terror Management

Terror management theory (TMT) states that human behavior is mostly motivated by an unconscious fear of mortality. In other words, awareness of one's own death affects the decision making of individuals and groups, a concept known as *mortality salience*.[109] Because death is always a possibility for us, fear of death is built into human life.[110] To cope with this fear, we erect defenses against death awareness, defenses that are based in denial and include an irrational belief in being "personally special" as well as an irrational belief in "an ultimate rescuer."[111]

Terror management theory suggests that people learn to assuage their fears of death by finding meaning in life and value in themselves, this meaning

and value being provided by the culture into which people are socialized.[112] "The resulting perception that one is a *valuable* member of a *meaningful* universe constitutes self-esteem; and self-esteem is the primary psychological mechanism by which culture serves its death-denying function."[113] Although cultures differ in their specific beliefs, they "share claims that the universe is meaningful and orderly, and that immortality is attainable, be it literally, through concepts of soul and afterlife, or symbolically, through enduring accomplishments and identifications."[114]

In an interview days before his death, Ernest Becker, the initiator of terror management studies, addressed "four strands of emphasis" relevant to terror management theory:[115]

1. The world is a terrifying place.
2. The basic motivation for human behavior is the need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death.
3. Because the terror of death is so overwhelming, we conspire to keep it unconscious.
4. Our heroic projects aimed at destroying evil have the paradoxical effect of bringing more evil into the world. . . . We are able to focus on almost any perceived threat, whether of people, political or economic ideology, race, religion, and blow it up psychologically into a life and death struggle against ultimate evil. . . . This is the dynamic of spiralizing violence that characterizes so much of human history.

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One of the common reactions to terror management theory is that it couldn't possibly be correct because people just don't think about death all that often.[116] However, studies show that "fear of death functions as a motivating force whether people are currently focused on this particular issue or not; it is the implicit knowledge of death rather than current focal awareness that is the motivating factor."[117] In a commentary on the TMT perspective, Robert Kastenbaum points out that we live with sorrow as well as anxiety, and that there are connections between anxiety and sorrow.[118] He says, "Much remains to be learned about the interweaving of sorrow and anxiety throughout human experience."[119] Summarizing the insights of TMT, Robert Solomon says, "Put in the least flattering way, we might say that my death is a bad thing because it deprives the universe of me."[120]

Studying Death and Dying

Take a death and dying course or read a book like this, and someone will probably ask, "Why would you want to take a class about death?" or "Why are you reading about death?" Despite public interest in death-related issues, individuals exhibit varying degrees of avoidance and acceptance when it comes to discussing death openly. A philosophy teacher tells how he was asked to lecture on a subject of his choosing, so he submitted the title "Facing Death." He reports that his hosts were shocked, forcing him to change to "Immortality: Pros and Cons."[121] Our relationship with death seems to be in a period of transition.

Ambivalent attitudes toward death are evident when one educator applauds the study of death as the "last of the old taboos to fall," while another contends that death is "not a fit subject for the curriculum." In response to this state of affairs, Patrick Dean observes that, if death education is criticized by some as a "bastard child of the curriculum, hidden in the closet," then those who value death education can be grateful to such critics because they are creating opportunities for highlighting the importance of death education as preparation for living.[122] In fact, Dean says, death education could appropriately be renamed "life and loss education," because "only through awareness of our lifelong losses and appreciation of our mortality are we free to be in the present, to live fully."

The Rise of Death Education

Informal death education occurs in the context of "teachable moments" that arise out of events in daily life. Such an event may be the death of a gerbil in an elementary school classroom, or it may be an event experienced widely, such as a school shooting, a terrorist attack, a devastating tsunami or hurricane, or the sudden death of a celebrity.

The first formal course in death education at an American university was initiated by Robert Fulton at the University of Minnesota in the spring of 1963.[123] The first conference on death education was held at Hamline University in Minnesota in 1970. From these beginnings, death education has

embraced a wide range of issues and topics, from nuts-and-bolts issues such as selecting mortuary services or probating an estate to philosophical and ethical matters such as the definition of death and speculation about what happens after death.

Because death education addresses both objective facts and subjective concerns, it receives broad academic support, with courses offered in a variety of disciplines.[124] In most courses, mastery of facts is enhanced by personal narratives that describe the myriad ways human beings encounter and cope with death.[125] The arts and humanities serve to balance scientific and technical perspectives. Images, symbols, and sounds express themes of life, death, and transcendence that allow for many ways of knowing and learning.

In the broad picture, death education includes training for physicians, nurses, allied health personnel, funeral directors, and other professionals whose duties involve contact with dying and bereaved individuals. This includes police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians (EMTs). As witnesses to human tragedy in the line of duty, they are called upon to comfort victims and survivors. The stoic image of the police officer, EMT, or firefighter who "keeps it all in" instead of expressing natural emotions is challenged by the recognition that such a strategy may be physically and psychologically harmful.

Pioneers in Death Studies

The establishment of death studies in modern times can be traced to explorations of death by Freud and others of the psychoanalytic school and to anthropological accounts of death customs in far-flung societies. Discourse about death and dying during the 1940s and 1950s is highlighted by, for example, Sylvia Anthony's studies of children (1940), Erich Lindemann's analysis of acute grief among survivors of a nightclub fire (1944), and Geoffrey Gorer's essay "The Pornography of Death" (1955; reprinted 1963).[126] Edgar Jackson wrote about grief for both lay and scholarly readerships in publications such as *Understanding Grief: Its Roots, Dynamics, and Treatment* (1957) and *You and Your Grief* (1961). The 1950s may have been the threshhold of a new era in which death and dying were "rediscovered." The question became "What does death mean to you?"[127]

The modern scientific approach to the study of death, or thanatology, is usually traced to a symposium organized by Herman Feifel at a 1956 meeting in Chicago of the American Psychological Association.[128] This symposium resulted in a book, edited by Feifel: *The Meaning of Death* (1959). This landmark book brought together experts from different disciplines whose essays encompassed theoretical approaches, cultural studies, and clinical insights. Death was shown to be an important topic for public and scholarly consideration. Given the prevailing resistance at that time to discussing death, this was no easy feat. About his early efforts in death studies, Feifel recalled that he was emphatically told that "the one thing you never do is to discuss death with a patient."[129]

The same message was communicated to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whose book *On Death and Dying* (1969) "caught the public's imagination" by "offering a vision of a natural death unburdened by technology."[130] Hospice pioneer Cicely Saunders had addressed similar issues in her earlier work, *Care of the Dying* (1959). Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss applied the tools of sociological analysis to conduct studies focusing on the way awareness of dying affected patients, hospital staff, and family members and on how the "timing" of death occurred in hospital settings. These studies, published as *Awareness of Dying* (1965) and *Time for Dying* (1968), showed that caregivers were reluctant to discuss death and avoided telling patients they were dying. Jeanne Quint Benoliel, who collaborated with Glaser and Strauss, published *The Nurse and the Dying Patient* (1967), which called for systematic death education for nurses.

The 1960s were a fruitful period for death studies. John Hinton's *Dying* (1967) shed light on contemporary practices and suggested how care of the dying could be improved. In "Death in American Society" (1963), sociologist Talcott Parsons looked at the impact of technological advances in health and medicine on dying. Philosopher Jacques Choron traced the history of ideas and attitudes about death and investigated the fear of death and its meaning for human beings in *Death and Western Thought* (1963) and *Death and Modern Man* (1964). Robert Fulton gathered a group of scholars and practitioners to address both theoretical and practical issues in his compilation, *Death and Identity* (1965). During the same era, literary works such as C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961) brought attention to issues involving bereavement and mourning.

The progress of death studies during the 1960s continued into the 1970s with works like Avery D. Weisman's *On Dying and Denying: A Psychiatric Study of Terminality* (1972), which astutely combined research skills and clinical experience with dying patients, and Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973), which drew upon a broad range of psychological and theological insights in order to better understand the "terror" of death in human life. Richard Kalish and David K. Reynolds initiated multicultural studies in *Death and Ethnicity: A Psychocultural Study* (1976). The early 1970s also witnessed the blossoming of the first peer-reviewed journal in the field of death studies, *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying,* which had begun its life as a newsletter in 1966 with an article in the first issue by Weisman titled "Birth of the Death-People."[131] This was a decade of collaboration and connection, as individuals recognized a mutual interest manifested in organizations like The Foundation of Thanatology, Ars Moriendi (a forerunner of the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement, or IWG) and the Forum for Death Education and Counseling (now known as the Association for Death Education and Counseling, or ADEC).[132]

In the decades since these pioneering contributions, *Omega* has been joined by other scholarly journals, including *Death Studies; Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss; Illness, Crisis, and Loss;* and *Mortality* (an international journal published in the United Kingdom), and textbooks in thanatology

have come on the scene.[133] Meanwhile, books written for a general readership, such as Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* and Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking,* have become bestsellers, and information about death and dying is now widely available on the Internet. In 1971, the *Psychology Today* questionnaire "You and Death" garnered a response from readers that exceeded the response to a previous sex questionnaire. A recent study of responses to the questionnaire concluded that "interest in death as a topic was not a passing fad but continues to be a topic of interest across the United States."[134]

The publication of several encyclopedic works covering death studies (including at least one on the Internet) is another sign of the maturing of the field.[135] Clearly, the seeds planted a few decades ago by pioneers have ripened into a thriving interest in dying, death, and bereavement that is evident in both the academic setting and the larger public arena.[136]

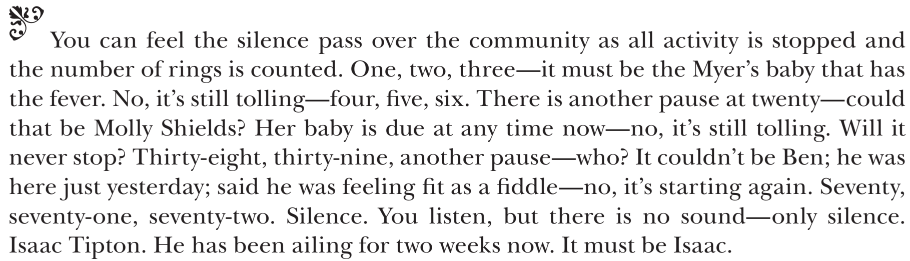
Tracing the emergence of thanatology, Luciana Fonseca and Ines Testoni write: "Thanatology *theory* took shape as death studies and research, whereas thanatology *practice* manifests primarily as formal death education, end-of-life care, and bereavement counseling."[137] Hannelore Wass observes that thanatology can help individuals and societies transcend self-interest in favor of concern for others.[138] Death studies "is about love, care, and compassion . . . about helping and healing."

Factors Affecting Familiarity with Death

The past hundred years have seen dramatic change in the size, shape, and distribution of the American population—that is, its *demographics.* These changes—the most notable of which involve increased life expectancy and lower mortality rates—significantly affect our expectations about death. In the past, a typical household would include parents, uncles, aunts, and aged grandparents, as well as children of varying ages. Such extended families, with several generations living together under the same roof, are rare today. One consequence is that most of us have fewer opportunities to experience our relatives' deaths firsthand.

Consider how experiences with dying and death have changed.[139] During the late 1800s and early 1900s, individuals typically died at home, often surrounded by an extended family that spanned several generations. As death drew near, relatives and friends gathered to maintain a vigil at the bedside. Afterward, they washed the body and prepared it for burial. A home-built coffin was placed in the parlor of the house, where friends and relatives participated in a wake and shared in mourning the deceased. Death was a domestic experience.

In close-knit communities, a death bell tolled the age of the deceased, giving notification of the death so that others in the community could join in the rites and ceremonies marking the deceased's passing (see Figure 1-2). Children were included in activities surrounding the dead, staying with adults and sometimes sleeping in the same room as the corpse. Later, in a



You can feel the silence pass over the community as all activity is stopped and the number of rings is counted. One, two, three—it must be the Myer's baby that has the fever. No, it's still tolling—four, five, six. There is another pause at twenty—could that be Molly Shields? Her baby is due at any time now—no, it's still tolling. Will it never stop? Thirty-eight, thirty-nine, another pause—who? It couldn't be Ben; he was here just yesterday; said he was feeling fit as a fiddle—no, it's starting again. Seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two. Silence. You listen, but there is no sound—only silence. Isaac Tipton. He has been ailing for two weeks now. It must be Isaac.

Figure 1-2 *Tolling the Bell*

family plot at the homeplace or a nearby churchyard cemetery, the coffin was lowered into the grave, and those closest to the deceased shoveled dirt over the coffin to fill in the grave. Throughout this process, from caring for the dying person through burial, death remained within the realm of the family.

If you were a person living in those times who was suddenly transported to the present, you would likely experience culture shock as you walked into the "slumber room" of a typical mortuary. There, in place of a simple wooden coffin, you view an elaborate casket. The corpse shows the mortician's skill in cosmetic restoration. At the funeral, you watch as relatives and friends eulogize the deceased. Ah, that's familiar, you say—but where is the dear departed? Off to the side a bit, the casket remains closed, death tastefully concealed. At the graveside, as the service concludes, you are amazed to see mourners leaving while the casket lies yet unburied; the cemetery crew will complete the actual burial. You may be most impressed by the fact that the deceased's family and friends are spectators rather than participants. The tasks of preparing the dead for burial and managing the rites of passage are carried out by hired professionals.

Our familiarity with death has also been powerfully influenced by sophisticated medical technologies, which have affected both the *place* where death most often occurs and the *manner* in which most people die. In contrast to earlier generations, who typically had major roles in the care of their dying and dead, we usually rely on professionals—from the cardiologist to the coroner to the cremator—to act as our go-betweens. The net result is that, for most of us, death is unfamiliar.

Life Expectancy and Mortality Rates

Since 1900, average life expectancy in the United States has increased from forty-seven to nearly seventy-nine years (see Figure 1-3).[140] Japan, at eighty-three years, has the longest life expectancy of countries worldwide.[141] These figures reflect what demographers call "cohort life expectancy," meaning the *average* number of years a specified group of infants would live if they were to experience throughout their lives the age-specific death rates prevailing in their birth year. Thus, for 2011, life expectancy at birth for the U.S. population as a whole was 78.7 years. When this overall U.S. cohort is

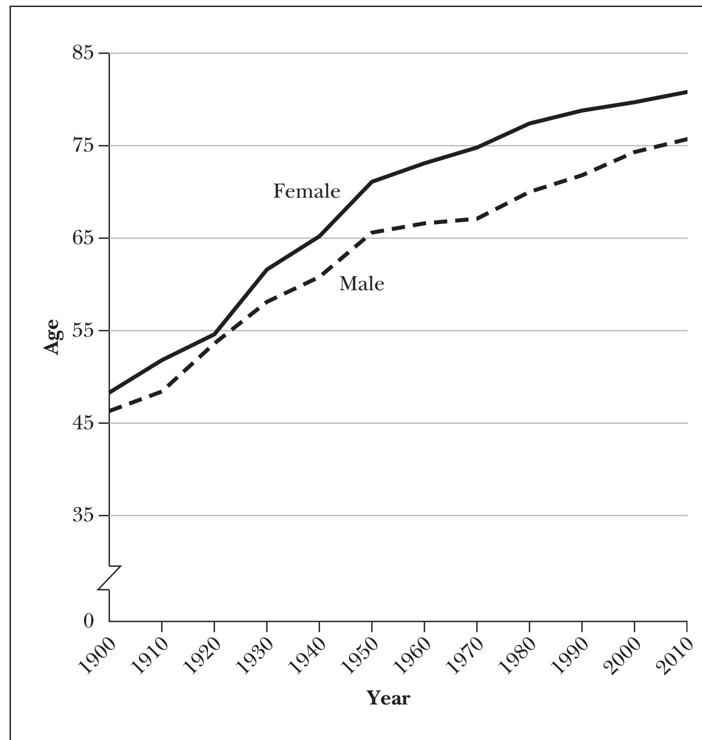


Figure 1-3 *Expectation of Life at Birth, 1900–2010*

broken out into population groups, however, we find that Hispanic females have the longest life expectancy (83.7 years), followed by non-Hispanic white females (81.1 years), Hispanic males (78.9 years), non-Hispanic black females (77.8 years), non-Hispanic white males (76.4 years), and non-Hispanic black males (71.6 years).[142] In addition to differences between birth cohorts, it should be recognized that such figures represent statistical life expectancies. The actual life span lived out by any particular individual may well be significantly shorter or longer than the average for his or her cohort.

Although there are certainly localized and regional variations, widespread human longevity is quite recent, occurring in the last century or so. As one writer said, "Despite what the fashion magazines tell you, 40 isn't the new 30. Seventy is."[143] Today, we tend to assume that a newborn child will live into his or her seventh or eighth decade, perhaps longer. This was not the case in 1900. Over half of the deaths in 1900 occurred among children age fourteen and younger; now, fewer than 2 percent of deaths occur among this age group.[144] This fact influences how we think (or don't think) about death.

Another way to appreciate the changing impact of death is to examine death rates (which are typically stated as the number of individuals dying per 1000 population in a given year). In 1900, the death rate in America was about 17 per 1000; today, it is about 7.4 per 1000, a record low (see Figure 1-4).[145]

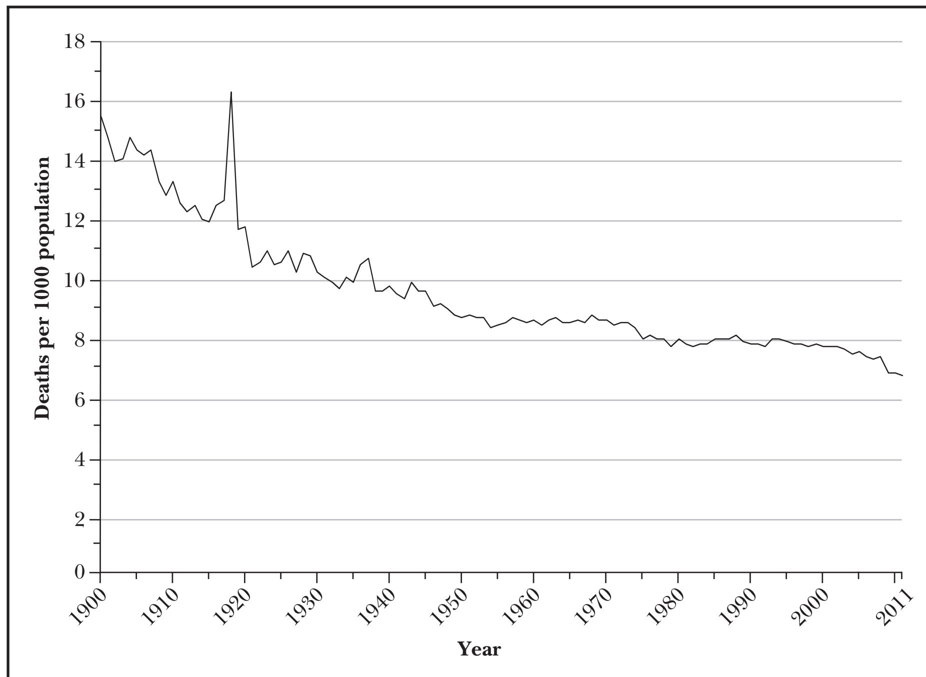


Figure 1-4 *Death Rates, 1900–2011*

Imagine yourself in an environment where death at an early age is common. Consider how different experiences of dying and death were at a time when the comparatively high percentage of infant deaths tended to be thought of as a matter of "fate" that could not be changed. Both young and old were familiar with death as a natural part of the human condition. In the 1870s, nine out of ten Americans over fifteen had lost a parent or sibling.[146] Mothers died in childbirth; babies were stillborn; one or both parents might die before their children had grown to adolescence. Surviving siblings often had a postmortem photograph of a dead brother or sister displayed, a memorial to the deceased and testament to the integrity of the family.[147] Living with a commonplace awareness of mortality, our ancestors could not avoid the fact of death. Ultimately, of course, none of us is exempt. Despite the increases in life expectancy and lowered death rates, the statistical odds of dying still finally add up to 100 percent.

Causes of Death

Changes in life expectancy and mortality rates are due largely to changes in the most common causes of death. In the early 1900s, the leading causes of death were related to acute infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid fever, diphtheria, streptococcal septicemia, syphilis, or pneumonia. Most such diseases came on suddenly, and death soon followed. Today, most deaths result from a chronic illness, such as heart disease, cancer, or stroke, and tend

TABLE 1-4 *Leading Causes of Death: United States*

Cause of Death	Deaths	% of Total Deaths
All causes	2,512,873	100.0
Heart disease	596,339	23.7
Cancer	575,313	22.9
Respiratory disease	143,382	5.7
Stroke	129,931	5.2
Accidents	122,777	4.9
Alzheimer's disease	84,691	3.4
Diabetes	73,282	2.9
Influenza and pneumonia	53,667	2.1
Kidney disease	45,731	1.8
Suicide	38,285	1.5

to follow a slow, progressive course that lasts weeks, months, or even years (see Table 1-4). The ten leading causes of death account for about 75 percent of all deaths in the United States, with the top two causes, heart disease and cancer, accounting for nearly half of all deaths.[148] (It is worth noting that, although heart disease and cancer are the two leading causes of death, accidental deaths result in slightly more lost years of potential life; that is, the number of dead is smaller, but the number of years of life lost is greater.)[149]

This historical shift in patterns of disease and causes of death—a shift that demographers call an *epidemiologic transition*—is characterized by a redistribution of deaths from the young to the old.[150] (Epidemiology is the study of the patterns of health and disease.) With a reduced risk of dying at a young age from infectious diseases, more people survive into older ages, where they tend to die from degenerative diseases. This results in a growing proportion of aged people in the population.

In 1900, people sixty-five and older made up 4 percent of the population in the United States; now they constitute just over 13 percent.[151] In other words, the proportion of aged people in the population has more than tripled since 1900, and adults aged sixty-five and over are expected to constitute one-fifth of the total U.S. population by the year 2030.[152] In 1900, people sixty-five and older accounted for about 17 percent of deaths; today, about 73 percent of the 2.5 million deaths each year in the United States occur among people in this age group.[153] In short, people are living longer and dying at older ages. One result is that we tend to associate death with the elderly when, in fact, it is not confined to any particular segment of the life span.

Geographic Mobility and Intergenerational Contact

Historically, relationships with friends, neighbors, and relatives were closely tied to place; today, they depend more on one's present role or function than on a lifetime of shared experiences. Children, once they are grown, rarely live in the same house with parents or, even more rarely, with their

Gordon Parks, FSA Collection, Library of Congress

Five generations of the Machado family form an extended family network rarely seen today. Firsthand experiences of death in such a family come through the closeness of multigenerational living.

brothers and sisters in an extended family setting. Few high school or college friendships continue through marriage and the childrearing years into retirement. Because of social and geographic mobility, people are less likely to be present at the deaths of relatives or friends. The result is a loss of shared death rituals.

Of course, some families maintain close relations, even when they don't share the same dwelling or live in the same town. Patterns of mobility also vary among individuals and groups. Some ethnic and cultural groups

I often wonder what it would be like to be born and raised and live one's whole life in the same zip code. I wonder what it would be like to be able to dial all of one's family and friends without an area code. What it would be like not to always be missing one person or the other, one place or the other. What it would be like to return to a family home in which one grew up and still had things stored in the attic.

My family is in area code 405 and my best friend's in 415 and I'm living in 212. The in-laws are in 203. And there are other friends in 213 and 202, in 412 and 214.

Beverly Stephen, "A Mobile Generation in Search of Roots"

continue to place a high value on maintaining strong family ties despite general trends in society. Reduced contact with kin may be partly compensated for by increased contact with friends and neighbors.

Generally speaking, in modern societies there is less intermingling of the generations, a normal part of daily life in earlier times. Consider the experience of two small children on a Halloween trek, going door to door. After knocking on several well-lighted doors in a seniors-only mobile-home park and receiving no response, their cries of "Trick or treat!" were answered by a woman who said, "You'll not get any Halloween treats in this place. Only old people live here, and they leave their lights on for security and safety, not to welcome children on Halloween!"

Life-Extending Technologies

Seriously ill or injured individuals are likely to find themselves surrounded by an astonishing array of machinery. Sophisticated machines monitor such biological functions as brain wave activity, heart rate, body temperature, respiration, blood pressure, pulse, and blood chemistry. Signaling changes in body function by light, sound, and computer printout, such devices can make a crucial difference in situations of life or death. In place of a sense of the inevitability of death, we are now prone to "an exaggerated faith in the ability of scientific medicine to prolong life."[154] This faith has been called "exaggerated optimism" and "irrational exuberance."[155]

Advanced medical technology that seems to one person a godsend, extending life, may seem to another a curse that only prolongs dying. Dignity can be devalued amid technology focused solely on the biological organism. What are the trade-offs in applying medical technologies to the end stage of life? The conventional definition of death as "the cessation of life, the total and permanent cessation of all vital functions" may be superseded by a medicolegal definition, which acknowledges the fact that life can be sustained artificially. In short, the definition of death is not always as straightforward as the simple statement "When you're dead, you're dead."

Thus, medical technology is yet another factor lessening our familiarity with dying and death. Modern medicine tends to distance family and friends from the patient who is dying. The attitude that "what can be done, should

be done" increases the odds that technological fixes will be tried, even when success or cure is unlikely. When death does come, it may seem unexpected. Technological medicine promotes a view of death as an event that can be deferred indefinitely rather than as a normal, natural part of life. In short, death has become "a radically unnatural occurrence."[156]

The "medicalization of death" is a significant manifestation of the disappearance of death from the public domain. Although discussion of death occurs to some extent in the public space, death is hidden from public gaze. At the same time, as Chris Shilling notes, "there is a growing demand for representations of death: from war documentaries and news, to violent movies and television series based around hospital casualty departments."[157] All of these demographic and social variables can be understood as sociocultural forces that influence the way we learn about death through childhood and beyond.

© Clem Murray, AP Photo

Lifelines—tubes and wires monitoring heartbeat, breathing, and blood pressure—increase this premature baby's chances of survival in the intensive care unit of Philadelphia's Children's Hospital. The special-care nursery often becomes an arena for many of the most difficult ethical decisions in medicine.

The Internet and the Digital Age

Another force currently shaping our attitudes and understanding toward death is information and communication technology (ICT). This refers to the integration of telecommunications (telephone lines and wireless signals) and computers, as well as necessary software, middleware, storage, and audio-visual systems, which enable users to access, store, transmit, and manipulate information. These technologies, which have spread rapidly worldwide, are affecting global consciousness regarding death, dying, and bereavement. Scholars note that "the use of the Internet for death-related information and education has expanded to include loss-specific multifaceted websites, social networking for support, interactive counseling, artistic expression, blogging, cyber memorials, and postmortem continuing bonds."[158] Gadgets like smart phones and tablets expand opportunities for connection to the Internet. Tony Walter and colleagues say the evidence indicates that "the internet has significant implications for many current concepts in death studies."[159] It is accurate to say that the Internet and World Wide Web have become part of the modern death system (discussed in Chapter 4). Indeed, ICT influences thanatology in many ways, not only in terms of access to information but also in terms of support for people with life-threatening illness and for those who are bereaved.

The editors of a book about death in the "online universe" report the following story:

> A young man was able to participate in his grandmother's funeral despite being unable to book a flight in time to attend the actual event. Instead, as a musician, he composed a piece in honor of his grandmother, digitally recorded it, and attached it to an email sent to his aunt, who burned it onto a CD and played it less than twelve hours later at the memorial service.[160]

Social networking sites allow for connection to family, friends, and community and are important sources of support for the bereaved.[161] The bereaved may maintain relational continuity with the deceased by posting messages on sites such as Facebook. Indeed, grieving individuals often post messages to the deceased as if the deceased could read the messages.[162] Although it is usual to think of teens and young adults as the "wired" generation, social networking sites like Facebook also receive heavy use by the elderly and the disabled, who are empowered to manage social contacts without leaving home. As Robert Neimeyer says, "We are wired for attachment in a world of impermanence."[163]

Crisis text lines are becoming a new form of hotline to which teens and other individuals who are in crisis can "text" their concerns rather than calling a telephone hotline or using other forms of computer-based chat. One teen, who used a hotline to seek assistance in averting suicidal thoughts, said, "I think teens would definitely use a hotline if they could text to it; most teens keep their feelings to themselves."[164]

Social media are also being integrated into emergency-preparedness efforts. Web-based platforms use information gathered from online communities ("crowd-sourced") to support crisis management, link health care

providers, get supplies to those needing them, and aid trapped victims.[165] The Internet can be an avenue providing immediate response to crisis and loss.

Internet activities can reduce social isolation and disenfranchisement by allowing individuals to form online communities devoted to particular losses, such as pet loss. The virtual world offers opportunities to mourn that are not available in the "real" world. However, there can also be negative aspects to social media as grievers experience a lack of privacy. Exposure online may leave some users feeling distressed and violated.

Finally, what about the "digital afterlife"? Observers remark, "In the virtual world, if you have an online presence, you have the issue of your 'digital legacy' to consider as you prepare for your eventual death."[166] What happens to online accounts after a person's death? Families and online companies may find themselves on opposite sides in a battle for access to digital assets: social media accounts, online photos and other records, e-mails, posts, and blogs. Consider a death by suicide. In earlier times, diaries and letters could be examined for clues to the individual's state of mind or the circumstances leading to his or her death. Now, such paper-based artifacts are being replaced by digital files. Whereas a safe deposit box at the bank becomes part of the deceased's estate and whoever controls the estate can open the box, the situation with online assets is less clear. Privacy tends to be a big issue in the online world, and the deceased may not have wanted his or her family or other persons granted access to Internet files. Survivors may have no idea about what their loved one would want to have happen to their online accounts.

With some social media providers, a dead user's account can be memorialized, which leaves it active so friends and family can leave posts in remembrance. Other providers say that accounts are not transferable and simply deactivate an account upon receipt of a death certificate. Companies such as Legacy Locker and Entrustet provide avenues for determining the disposition of Internet accounts after death.

Examining Assumptions

Death is unavoidably part of our lives. Not thinking or not talking about death doesn't remove us from its power. Such ostrichlike behavior only limits our choices for coping with dying and death. As death educator Robert Kavanaugh said, "The unexamined death is not worth dying."[167] Historian David Stannard tells us that in societies in which each person is unique, important, and irreplaceable, death is not ignored but is marked by a "community-wide outpouring of grief for what is a genuine social loss."[168] Conversely, in societies where people feel that "little damage is done to the social fabric by the loss of an individual," death tends not to be acknowledged outside of that person's immediate circle.

Among communities where traditional beliefs, values, and practices are maintained, death is part of the natural rhythm of life. The act of dying, the most private act any person can experience, is a community event. A death

initiates an outpouring of social support for the bereaved family and for the wider community. Our values and preferences play an unavoidable part in the quest to examine assumptions and think clearly about death.

Death in a Cosmopolitan Society

At the California Science Center in Los Angeles, a public exhibition of more than 200 cadavers attracted more than 650,000 visitors (doubling the previous record set by an exhibit of *Titanic* artifacts).[169] Titled "Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies," previous exhibitions in Europe and Asia had spawned protests over displaying bodies that had been *plastinated* (a process that involves replacing body fluids with clear, pliable plastic, making it possible to position in dynamic poses not only a whole cadaver but also skeletal bones and internal systems such as blood vessels), thereby offering viewers an "insider's view of the effects of disease and ailments, such as lung disease, hardened arteries, tumors, and ulcers." German physician Gunther von Hagens, inventor of the plastination process, calls the result "anatomic artwork."

Some said the exhibit's popularity was due to the fact that "morbidity has always been a spectator sport," alluding to the exhibit's macabre aspects. Others praised it as an educational opportunity for both children and adults to appreciate firsthand the wonder of the human body, as well as its deterioration from the ravages of disease. What do these contrasting reactions tell us about attitudes toward death? Is the specter of death, positive or negative, in the eyes of the beholder? What do you imagine your own response might be?

The quest for meaningful answers to questions involving human mortality requires us to contemplate what it means to live in a society that scholars describe as "postmodern" and "cosmopolitan."[170] This perspective encourages us to value diversity and pluralism by examining "taken-for-granted" beliefs and considering ideas and practices from other historical periods and cultures. In the contemporary era, individuals are exposed to diverse cultures and a "plurality of life worlds."[171]

Postmodern thought is concerned with the contingency, fragility, and arbitrariness of human life.[172] As one scholar remarked, "Postmodernism can be regarded as a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured."[173] It reflects a skepticism about culture and its aims, including a belief in progress in all areas of human endeavor.

In a cosmopolitan world, people are being forced to deal with three related social processes: globalization, accelerated individualization, and consumer societies. As one writer said, "Accelerated individualization has largely emancipated individuals from many ascribed social bonds," resulting in "an unprecedented degree of freedom, but at the same time [creating] an unprecedented task of coping with its consequences."[174]

According to Ulrich Beck, a German scholar and keen observer of the "cosmopolitan society," the human condition in the present century cannot

be understood nationally or locally but only globally.[175] British sociologist Anthony Giddens says,

> In a globalizing world, where information and images are routinely transmitted across the globe, we are all regularly in contact with others who think differently, and live differently, from ourselves.[176]

Global concerns are becoming part of local experiences for an increasing number of people.[177]

Your classmates may arrive at different conclusions as they seek appropriate responses to death. Some may prefer an option for swift and low-cost body disposal instead of the traditional funeral. Others might choose a conventional funeral because they feel it provides a necessary framework for meeting the social and psychological needs of survivors (see Figure 1-5). Or consider the likelihood of differing values and attitudes concerning such issues as medical care at the end of life and decisions about whether to withhold or withdraw life-sustaining treatment. Is it feasible to allow space for only one point of view? Or do we need room for diversity of opinion and practice?

Medical technology, demographic changes, shifting disease patterns, urbanization, and professionalization, among other factors, all influence how we die, grieve, and care for our dead. Marina Sozzi, an Italian thanatologist, observes that the wish to die a "natural" death, seen as an event that concludes

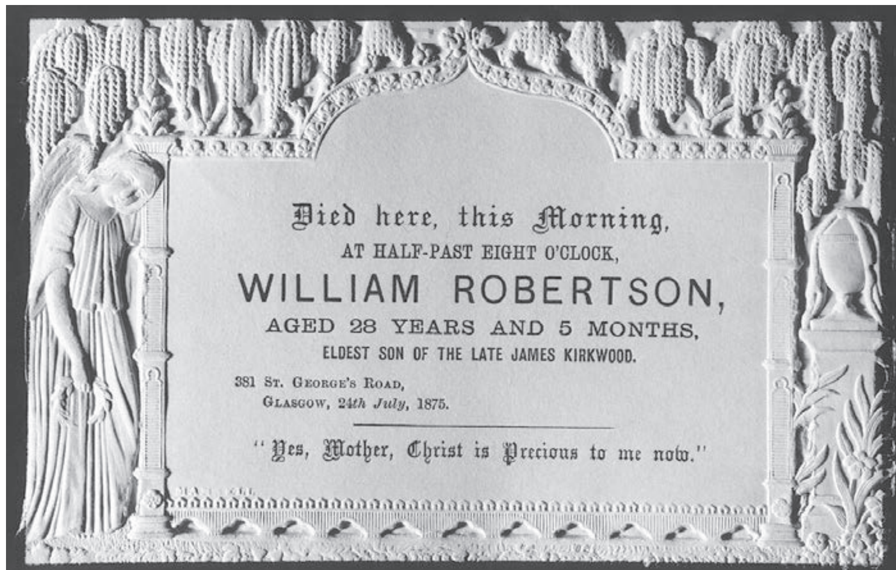


Figure 1-5 *Embossed Linen Death Notification, 1875*
This card exemplifies the formality of nineteenth-century mourning customs. The etiquette books of the period often devoted considerable space to the procedural details associated with the wearing of mourning clothes, the issuance of funeral invitations, and other behaviors appropriate to the survivors of a death.

a genetically determined life cycle, has become a modern myth. By delegating our relationship with death to professionals—doctors, nurses, undertakers, and so on—we try to avoid thinking about mortality and "dream about someone who, equipped with the necessary skills," will guarantee us a "sweet" death with no real loss of self. "Our culture," she says, "has lost the capacity of making the experience of death fecund; thus, death becomes an impersonal deadline of the body, a fatality inscribed inside it, pure biology."[178]

The latest chapter of the modern story of dying is perhaps best termed *managed death*. Even when a prognosis of death has been accepted by medical staff and families, and when further treatments intended to cure have been put aside, there may nevertheless be a strong desire to manage the situation so that it comes out "right." However, as Robert Kastenbaum says, "guidelines for an existentially correct management of death have yet to forthcome."[179] One expression of movement toward managed death involves the aim of ending treatment just at the proper moment so that the person is enabled to die a quiet or peaceful death. Another involves the attempt to control the timing of death even more completely through physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia. In light of such efforts, Daniel Callahan says it seems that death is becoming "just one more choice-and-efficiency issue, to be domesticated along with traffic jams and other excesses of modern life."[180]

Exploring Your Own Losses and Attitudes

Social scientists use the term *cultural lag* to describe the phenomenon of societies' "falling behind" in dealing with new challenges resulting from rapid technological and social change. It may be that we are in a period of cultural lag with respect to dying and death. Recently, a novel forum for discussing death and end-of-life matters has proliferated in venues worldwide, primarily in Europe and the United States: the *death café*. This is an event at which coffee and cake are served in a relaxed setting while people gather to initiate conversation about death-related topics. Organizers aim to create an environment where talking about death is natural and comfortable. The goal is "to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives."[181] Glennys Howarth observes, "We appear to be living in a period where the study of death and the recognition of mortality have gained in popularity."[182]

Andrew Ziner says,

> Like nearly every other aspect of our lives, our understandings and feelings about dying and death are derived from our involvement in the myriad of groups, organizations, and institutions that represent our communities and, ultimately, constitute our society. As these religious, economic, legal, and familial structures change over time, we also change. This is because, as social beings, all of the meanings we attach to personal and cultural concerns—including dying and death—are inexorably tied to our social worlds. For example, how do you feel when you hear the word *death?* If you were born a century earlier, would you feel the same way? Is the difference due to individual or social factors?[183]

A perspective informed by values of connectedness and community, which acknowledges and celebrates difference and diversity, can help us discover personally meaningful and socially appropriate choices for the times in which we live and die, giving us a "pluralistic way of understanding and being in the world."[184] After reviewing dozens of studies, researchers found that contemplating mortality brings positive results, such as better health decisions, increased altruism and helpfulness, and decreased militaristic attitudes.[185]

Our attitudes toward death develop out of a lifetime of experiences with significant losses, beginning in childhood and continuing into old age. Exploring the meaning of these losses and their influence on our attitudes and practices is part of a comprehensive study of death and dying. It can be helpful to construct a "lossography," an account of the losses we have experienced, allowing time for investigation and reflection about the circumstances in which they occurred and the ways in which we and significant others in our environment responded to those losses.

It's been said, "The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty."[186]

Further Readings

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Additional resources for this chapter can be found at www.mhhe.com/despelder10e